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Martz tells Libby residents to 'quit condemning'

By TOM LACEKY

Associated Press Writer

LIBBY — Gov. Judy Martz showed the flag during a whirlwind visit here Wednesday, assuring residents that state government cares about them and urging them to care about each other.

"I just beg you all to try to work together," Martz told some 200 people at a three-hour afternoon "listening session." She said the same thing in a variety of ways through her day-long visit.

"Quit criticizing, complaining and condemning," she said later.

"Don't separate yourselves," she said at another stop. "What will you have in

three years if you can't speak to your neighbors?"

She was alluding to divisions within the community over questions of cleaning up decades of asbestos contamination and whether the town should be declared a Superfund site.

Dozens of asbestos-related deaths and hundreds of illnesses in Libby have been linked in recent years to the W.R. Grace & Co. vermiculite mine, which shut down in 1990. Vermiculite ore from the Libby mine contained tremolite asbestos, which is considered a major health threat when airborne. The vermiculite was used for years to make a variety of products, including household insula-

tion.

Three more years is the outside time period needed to complete cleanup of the area's nine sites of major contamination, said Paul Peronard, the Environmental Protection Agency's on-site coordinator.

The EPA is likely to propose listing the town and adjacent sites on its National Priorities List, which would provide additional federal cleanup help. As governor, Martz has near-veto power over the designation, but says she has not decided.

Peronard and the EPA got a standing ovation at the afternoon session. Nearly every speaker denounced Grace, calling the company deceitful and untrustworthy.

At a brief meeting later, members of the Libby Chamber of Commerce and other business people voiced major concerns about the financial troubles that a Superfund designation could cause.

Martz said her chief accomplishment on the trip was to assure the people of Libby that state government cares and is ready to help.

Peronard escorted Martz to several cleanup sites and explained the problems and the cleaning process.

Lerah Parker broke down and wept as she showed Martz photos of a 21-acre site along the Kootenai River just north of town where she and her husband, Mel, had operated Raintree Nursery. They

bought the site, including some buildings, from Grace in 1993, before the asbestos contamination was discovered. They learned of it in newspaper reports.

The site now is a major cleanup project, a dirt and rock field empty of greenery and filled with dirt-moving machines. The Parkers have been out for two years, but the EPA says they may be able to return late this year.

In town, Millwork West still operates in a building at Grace's old export plant. Owners Judy and Mel Burnett buttonholed the governor to charge that Grace did a poor job of cleaning the site, literally throwing some equipment and tools into a steel shed still covered with asbestos.

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